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# Anglican church apologises to sexual abuse victim Beth Heinrich



By Will Murray

Sexual Offences

Mon 23 Mar 2026 at 11:34am



Beth Heinrich was permanently changed by what she experienced as a teenager. (*Australian Story*)

## In short:

Archbishop Jeremy Greaves has apologised to Beth Heinrich for her abuse by Reverend Donald Shearman and church's failure to act earlier.

He also apologised for comments made by in the media by former governor general and then-archbishop Peter Hollingworth about Ms Heinrich.

## What's next?

Ms Heinrich said the apology brought to an end her years of struggle with the church, she hoped others would be inspired to seek their own justice.

The Anglican archbishop of Brisbane has issued an emotional apology to the victim of child sexual abuse perpetrated by a priest, saying the church failed her both as a child, and when she sought help later in life.

"Most grievously, those in positions of senior leadership within the Brisbane diocese, including former Archbishop Peter Hollingworth, failed Beth," Archbishop Jeremy Greaves told his congregation at St John's Cathedral on Sunday evening.

"Rather than responding with compassion, and justice, and accountability, the church's response compounded her suffering, and this was wrong."

Beth Heinrich, now 86, was sexually abused as a teenager by Reverend Donald Shearman in the central-west New South Wales town of Forbes in the 1950s.

She had been a minor in his care at an Anglican-run boarding house.



Beth Heinrich (second from right) as a school girl in the 1950s. *(Supplied: Beth Heinrich)*

In 1995, after Mr Shearman had moved to Queensland, she asked the then-Archbishop of Brisbane Dr Peter Hollingworth for help to have Mr Shearman removed from the clergy.

Dr Hollingworth denied that request, [despite overseeing mediation in which Mr Shearman admitted to abusing Ms Heinrich.](#)

In 2002, after being appointed to the position of Governor-General, Dr Hollingworth was questioned during an interview with the ABC about his alleged failure to take action against Mr Shearman.



Disgraced former Anglican bishop Donald Shearman standing on a boat, date unknown, who admitted to sexually abusing Beth Heinrich from when she was a 15-year-old schoolgirl in country Victoria. *(Supplied)*

During the interview he suggested that Ms Heinrich, 15 at the time, had instigated the sexual relationship with Mr Shearman, a married priest.

Dr Hollingworth resigned as governor-general in 2003 amid findings by the church he acted unfairly over his handling of child sexual abuse.

In 2023, a subsequent Anglican Church inquiry [found he committed misconduct](#) by allowing paedophile priests, including Mr Shearman, to keep working while he was the Archbishop of Brisbane in the 1990s.

Dr Hollingworth accepted those findings and said at the time: "I made mistakes and I cannot undo them. But I committed no crimes."

### **Archbishop: 'I honour your courage'**



Archbishop Greaves during his apology speech at the traditional Sunday Service. (ABC: William Murray)

During the traditional Sunday Service, Archbishop Greaves also lamented the additional harm that was done to Ms Heinrich by the church's failure to act in a timely manner against Mr Shearman, who wasn't defrocked until 2004.

"Beth, what happened to you was not your fault," he said.

"On behalf of the Diocese of Brisbane, I apologise to you for the abuse you suffered, and for the distress, isolation and harm caused by our failure to respond with integrity and care when you sought help."

At the end of the apology, the two shared a tearful embrace.



Archbishop Jeremy Greaves has apologised to Beth Heinrich for the abuse of Reverend Donald Shearman and the failure to act earlier. *(ABC: William Murray)*

It's a moment Beth Heinrich has waited decades for, and she travelled from regional Victoria to attend the service.

"[Archbishop Greaves] is the first that appears to believe me, that I haven't been treated properly by previous archbishops and previous church supporters," Ms Heinrich said.

"I want to encourage others ... if I can do it, others can do it too."

More than 70 years on from her abuse, she spoke of the pain of trying to seek the assistance and redress through senior church officials, only to be

disbelieved or pushed aside.

"When they deny you something, it's like you're being abused again," she said.

"And the more that happens, the bigger the restitution has to be because the problem in you grows and grows."



More than 70 years on from her abuse, Beth spoke of the pain of trying to seek the assistance and redress through senior church official. (ABC: *William Murray*)

While she said the apology brought to an end her years of struggle with the church, she hoped others would be inspired to seek their own justice.

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## **Counselling and support services**

- [Bravehearts](#), counselling and support for survivors of child sexual abuse: 1800 272 831
- [Lifeline](#), 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention: 13 11 14
- [Kids Helpline](#) on 1800 551 800
- [Headspace](#) on 1800 650 890 (children and young people)
- [ReachOut](#) at [au.reachout.com](http://au.reachout.com) (children and young people)

[Find support services in your state or territory.](#)